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SUBJECT: SURVEY ON REFUGEE RETURN TO CROATIA

Classified By: PolOff Mitch Benedict for reason 1.5 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Results of an extensive survey, financed jointly by USAID and the OSCE, show that only five percent of ethnic Serb refugees -- approximately 10,500 out of the estimated 210,000 ethnic Serbs from Croatia who are now in Serbia or Bosnia -- plan to return to Croatia in the next five years, and that receiving communities remain strongly opposed to return. The survey indicates that there are still strong currents of antipathy in Croatia to Serb refugee returns and that additional substantial returns of refugees are unlikely.

The survey has not yet been released publicly; however, the OSCE has discussed the results with the Government and briefed UNHCR.

¶2. (C) The reported five percent who plan to return compares with 25-30 percent of Croatia Serbs in Serbia who two years ago told UNHCR representatives they would return to Croatia under "certain conditions." The Croatia OSCE Mission says the survey simply confirms what they already know, mainly that refugee populations lack sufficient information in order to make an informed decision on return. We believe that information provided through an organized campaign, as proposed by the OSCE Mission, is by itself unlikely to boost returns substantially, and that in the end additional returns of ethnic Serb refugees to Croatia will number somewhere between the optimistic OSCE projection of 40,000 and the survey's 10,500. End Summary.

Background and Methodology of Survey

¶3. (SBU) USAID, in support of the OSCE's return and reintegration program, financed a survey to determine the emotional and motivational factors that affect the return of refugees (primarily Croatian Serbs) and the level of acceptance of their return by the local population. The survey, conducted by the Zagreb-based PULS Agency, looked at four different populations: (1) the domiciled population, mixed but largely ethnic Croat, living in areas of return for ethnic Serb refugees (the so-called "war-affected areas"); (2) ethnic Serb refugees originally from Croatia who are living in Serbia Montenegro and Bosnia Herzegovina; (3) ethnic Croat refugees from Bosnia Herzegovina who are living in Croatia; and, (4) a reference group of all Croatian citizens. (Comment: the 2001 census reported that 89.6 percent of the population of Croatia is ethnic Croat; ethnic Serbs make up 4.5 percent, and no other ethnic group makes up more than 0.5 percent of the population. The 1991 census found that 12.6 percent of the population was ethnic Serbs. End Comment.)

¶4. (SBU) The PULS survey was based on a questionnaire that was completed through a personal interview conducted in the respondent's place of residence. Interviews lasted 30-40 minutes, and were conducted in the December 2003 to January 2004 timeframe. The sample size for each of the four groups varied, but was between 600-1000 for each of the four groups. The research represented the largest survey done on public attitudes regarding the issue of refugee return and reintegration to date.

Substantial Additional Returns Unlikely

¶5. (SBU) Only five percent of both refugee populations -- ethnic Croat refugees from Bosnia Herzegovina and ethnic Serb refugees from Croatia -- say they plan on returning to their former country of domicile in the next five years. Given that there are approximately 210,000 ethnic Serb refugees (190,000 in Serbia Montenegro and 20,000 in Bosnia Herzegovina), a return rate of five percent would mean that only 10,500 ethnic Serb refugees plan to return. Only 15 percent of ethnic Serb refugees described Croatia as a place they would want to live and 60 percent say they will never return to their former homes.

¶6. (SBU) Information provided by former acquaintances, friends, and family forms the basis of what refugees know about former communities and homes. Most survey respondents

know someone who returned, and such private sources of information are the most trusted. Less than 15 percent of ethnic Serbs living in Serbia Montenegro report having heard positive impressions about conditions in their former homes,

while over 30 percent report having heard negative impressions. More than half of all ethnic Serbs responded that living among people of their own nationality is important or very important, which also supports a survey finding that both ethnic Croats and ethnic Serbs would be more willing to return if there is a return en masse.

17. (SBU) Younger and more educated survey respondents are the least likely to want to return -- a finding which is reflected by the actual returnee population. Most returnees are elderly; young people and families are unlikely to return to where there are no jobs, and the prospects for employment are slim. A large majority of respondents -- 68 percent of ethnic Serb refugees and 78 percent of ethnic Croat refugees -- say their primary focus over the next five years is to improve their living conditions where they now live.

Return of Refugees Still Strongly Opposed

18. (SBU) Among the domiciled population in war-affected areas of Croatia -- the mixed but largely ethnic Croat population that never left Croatia -- there is still strong opposition to the return of ethnic Serb refugees. Fully 30 percent of the population currently residing in war-affected areas responded that cohabitation between ethnic Serbs and Croats is completely or mostly impossible; half the respondents said they felt ethnic Serbs want to return to Croatia because they want to start the war again.

19. (SBU) By a margin of over 2:1 those who live in war-affected areas, and ethnic Croat refugees from Bosnia, think the return of Serbian refugees is not a good thing for Croatia. In addition, nearly 50 percent of the general population of Croatia thinks that the return of Serbian refugees is not a good thing for Croatia. Of the population living in war-affected areas, nearly 80 percent have had Serbian refugees return to their town or village, and more than half the respondents report they are not happy about it.

10. (SBU) There is also strong opposition to government assistance to ethnic Serb returnees, including reconstruction of homes and provision of alternative accommodation. Only three percent of all non-Serb respondents said the Government should encourage ethnic Serbs to return and give them all possible assistance to do so. In contrast, 30-40 percent of all non-Serb respondents said the government should not help Serbian refugees at all. A majority of respondents of the domiciled population in war-affected areas that never left, and the general population, think that ethnic Serbs should not get back their occupancy/tenancy rights. In general, 27-35 percent of all non-Serb respondents believe that ethnic Serbs left Croatia voluntarily and should not be allowed back.

OSCE Remains Guardedly Optimistic

11. (C) The OSCE Mission to Croatia told us that the survey confirms what the Mission already knows: there are strong reservations on the part of receiving communities toward the return of ethnic Serb refugees. However, OSCE Mission staffers have told us that the survey offers wide latitude for interpretation -- and that a total return of only 10,500 refugees (para 7) is well below their expectations. The OSCE's Return and Reintegration Unit will argue that they still expect approximately 14,000 total households -- at least 40,000 people -- to return by the end of 2006. Higher returns are still possible, according to the OSCE, if full and complete information is made available to potential returnees.

12. (U) The OSCE's optimistic figures are also based in part on an informal survey conducted in 2001 by UNHCR in Serbia during a re-registration exercise of all 230,000 refugees from Croatia in Serbia at the time. The data showed that approximately 25-30 percent of refugees -- 70,000 people -- said that they would return to Croatia under certain conditions, the primary one being return of housing or provision of alternative accommodation.

13. (U) A projected return of 14,000 households is based on the following. There are 12,000 pending applications for reconstruction assistance, and of those approximately half are likely to receive positive decisions for reconstruction assistance. In addition, the OSCE calculates that

approximately 23,000 households outside war-affected areas, and perhaps an additional 10,000 households within war-affected areas, lost their occupancy/tenancy right (OTR)

to live in socially owned apartments. According to the Government's estimate -- which the OSCE assumes to be low -- only 5,000 OTR holders will avail themselves of alternative accommodation and return to Croatia. Therefore, a total figure of 14,000 households still to return is based on 6,000 apartment dwelling families who receive compensation for lost OTR; 6,000 families who receive reconstruction assistance; and, 2,000 families who return to claimed properties that are now still occupied.

Comment

¶14. (C) The total number of additional returns through the end of 2006 is likely to fall somewhere between the survey's low estimate of 10,500 total individuals and the OSCE's optimistic estimate of 40,000. Unmarried youth and young families are the least likely to return because employment opportunities in the war-affected areas are relatively bleak and will remain so for the foreseeable future.

¶15. (C) The disincentives for the working age population to return are strong. There are few economic incentives for businesses to locate in these areas, and the huge socialist behemoths that once employed the masses by the thousands are either dead or dying for lack of investment and markets. Consequently, potential returnees are going to remain the elderly and those willing to engage in small-scale agricultural pursuits -- a limited population that is only getting smaller.

¶16. (C) We believe that OSCE and/or GOC information campaigns designed to encourage return are likely to be only marginally effective at best. Refugees are most likely to continue to make decisions on their future based on what they hear from former neighbors, friends, and family members who have returned. The attitudes of receiving communities, and how those attitudes play out in terms of safety and security, will remain paramount. A half million dollar ad campaign, for example, is likely to fall on deaf ears if ethnic Serb males can be arbitrarily arrested and detained on war crimes accusations (the perception in Eastern Slavonia), or that, once reconstructed, one's house may be attacked and burned -- as happened recently in the Zadar hinterlands.

¶17. (C) One could interpret the survey to mean that the primary factors determining return are societal attitudes and jobs, variables over which the GOC has only marginal control in the short to mid-term. That, combined with the estimate that the total number of future returnees is going to be relatively small, should give the GOC confidence to do all it can on the variables over which it does have control -- namely processing applications for reconstruction assistance, facilitating repossession, and providing alternative accommodation for former holders of OTR.

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